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NUTRITION COMMITTEES AND THEIR ROLE IN COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAMS

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Nutrition committees, made up of representatives of community agencies and organizations concerned with the nutrition of people, continue to have a great potential for promoting nutritional fitness for all. Over the years, these interdisciplinary groups, which include physicians, dentists, nutritionists, public health nurses, health educators, and the like, have contributed significantly to the solution of knotty problems in communities throughout the Nation.

Although the name of this publication no longer includes the word "committees," we will continue to report the fine work done by nutrition committees because we are convinced of their important role in the promotion of good community nutrition.

In this issue of NPN, we describe nutrition committees and the variety of activities with which they have been concerned as reported to Nutrition Programs Service or described in Nutrition Committee News (NCN) during the past 10 years.

OBJECTIVES REPORTED BY COMMITTEES

Each agency represented on interdisciplinary nutrition committees has some separate responsibility toward the alleviation or solution of community nutrition problems. All are committed to the promotion of desirable food practices for all people.

Over the years it has become apparent that a combined effort yields superior results, provided representatives from the several areas understand one another and learn to work together. Reports from many of these committees include the development of mutual understanding and techniques of successful group action among their objectives.

Mutual Understanding

Most nutrition committees report that one outcome of successful group activity is an increasing depth of under-

standing of objectives, procedures, and problems of member agencies and organizations. This, in turn, results in increased effectiveness and use of services and materials.

For example, the Texas State Nutrition Council, in describing its participation in the development of standards and guidance materials for day-care facilities, reported:

"Those who worked on the committee believe that more was achieved than the production of guidance materials. Working together on a common problem provided opportunities for increased understanding of the several participating groups and of the Texas State Nutrition Council." (NCN, March-April 1962).

The Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Nutrition Council reported (NCN, March-April 1955) that the Council provides a common meeting ground for direct-service agencies, related professional groups, and interested citizens to study needs and to plan how services may be better performed and how gaps in services may be filled.

"Frequently, nutritionists working together, as are those in the California Interagency Food and Nutrition Committee, find (1) they have produced material that is better than any one of them could have prepared alone and (2) they are able to have a unified approach to a common problem." (NCN, July-August 1956).

Members of the West Virginia Nutrition Council were asked to name some reasons for the continued growth and progress of their Council which includes more than 60 members with varied interests and different backgrounds of education and experience. The first reason was that meetings provide an opportunity to exchange information and to make and maintain helpful contacts for all members. (NCN, March-April 1956).

Interagency and Interorganization Cooperation

Nutrition committees by their organization promote cooperation among their several agencies and organizations.

A good example of this is the way nonfat dry milk was introduced in Iowa. (NCN, May-June 1954).

First, the Council worked with a manufacturer to make the dry milk product available in retail packages. When the milk appeared on the market throughout the State, each member of the Council worked through his own agency to inform the public of the product. This educational drive was carried out through public health and visiting nurses who passed the information on to their patients . . . through Extension home economists to families . . . through home economists who teach food preparation and nutrition . . . through home economists made available by the Iowa State College (now University) Dairy Department to demonstrate the use of dry milk . . . and through a council member on the Board of Control of State Institutions to institutional dietary departments.

Within a short time, use of dry milk in Iowa increased considerably as a result of these combined efforts and activities coordinated by the State nutrition council.

Helping Members Keep Up With Research

Committees report a variety of activities to help members keep abreast of the newest knowledge in nutrition. Conferences, institutes, reports of meetings of professional organizations, and the like help members keep up-to-date.

The Ohio Nutrition Committee initiated annual conferences for this purpose in 1953. Maine held its first nutrition institute in 1956 with the theme, "Nutrition Today . . . How Do We Stand?" The New York State Nutrition Committee usually holds a midwinter 1-day meeting, a spring institute of several days, and at least one other short meeting each year to hear about new nutrition findings and nutrition activities in the State.

The Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Nutrition Council started issuing a newsletter in 1954 so its 65 members can keep abreast of one another's activities and also get an idea of activities in the world of nutrition research.

ACTIVITIES

Activities of nutrition committees vary from year to year depending on the most pressing nutrition problems in the community. Besides the activities to promote exchange of information reported above, most committees report work in such areas as: (1) the determination of local nutritional problems, (2) consultant help upon request, (3) work with other community groups on common problems, (4) applied

nutrition, (5) coordination of community efforts, and (6) recruitment for the foods and nutrition professions.

Determination of Local Problems

Nutrition committees work effectively to gather information indicating the extent of community nutrition problems.

The Virgin Islands' Nutrition Committee made a survey of breakfasts of students in Charlotte Amalie High and Elementary Schools, St. Thomas, **Virgin Islands**. They learned that more than a third of the students had poor breakfasts. The Committee used these findings in a community-wide Better Breakfast Month. Results of the survey were reported in the local newspapers, on the radio, and in talks in high school assemblies and in PTA meetings. This was followed by an educational program in the schools. A later survey revealed marked improvement in eating habits. (NCN, January-February 1957).

Food habit studies of approximately 4,000 teenagers were made in **New Jersey** by the New Jersey Nutrition Council to learn what an educational program for this age group should include and where the emphasis should be placed. The results were later presented to home economics teachers at a State teachers' institute for use in curriculum planning. Other organizations were informed of the availability of the studies for use in community programs. (NCN, January-February 1958).

The **Illinois** Nutrition Committee and Chicago Nutrition Association conducted a survey to determine the nutrition activities of selected organizations in Illinois that work with nutrition problems. The purpose was to define areas in which these organizations could cooperate for a more effective nutrition program and to learn where their own efforts might best be used. (NCN, July-August 1958).

Consultant Help Upon Request

Committees active in promoting community programs are frequently called upon to provide consultant or other help for other groups. The **Texas** committee made a real contribution in the development of State standards for day-care facilities.

The **West Virginia** committee is constantly providing consultant help to groups working with low-income families.

The **Indiana** Nutrition Council supplies speakers for meetings of allied professional groups. For example, a public health nutritionist spoke on, "Nutrition and Dental Health" at the Indiana Dental Association convention in 1961 (NCN, January-February 1961).

Cooperative Activities

Many committees join forces with other interested groups to provide leadership in the solution of pressing local

problems. To name a few, the **New Jersey** Nutrition Council and the New Jersey State Department of Education cosponsored a 1-day conference devoted largely to the School Lunch program. Some 500 participants considered "nutrition teachings and practices" and made recommendations for developing (1) plans to help students who skip breakfast and (2) methods of lessening tensions during school lunch periods.

The **Connecticut** Council worked with a group called, "Parents and Friends of Retarded Children," to review nutrition as it relates to mental retardation (NCN, July-August 1958).

Applied Nutrition

Most committees report activities to help people learn and appreciate nutrition as it relates to personal health. These activities are many and varied.

At a presession of the 1958 Meeting of Nutrition Committee Members held during the American Home Economics Association Convention, committee chairmen were asked to select the one committee activity that they would rate most important. The majority of chairmen chose a project that directly reached people in their communities. Included were: Series of radio and TV programs, newspaper articles, displays in libraries, course in planning family meals at low cost, and better breakfast programs.

Other chairmen selected meetings to help nutritionists keep up to date, projects to encourage interest in the school lunch program, and meetings on how to involve key persons in community nutrition programs. (NCN, July-August 1958).

Coordination of Community Activities

The late President Kennedy's first executive order was to expand the program that provides donated foods directly to needy families. Two of the foods distributed were unfamiliar to most needy homemakers because they were not available on the retail market—nonfat dry milk (that did not dissolve instantly) and dried eggs. To use these foods to best advantage, it was necessary that these families learn how to (1) reconstitute the products, (2) use them in cooking, and (3) store the milk and eggs. The order was issued on January 20, 1961 and distribution was set for March 1, 1961.

Almost immediately, nutrition committees in several States offered their services as a coordinating group. Demonstrations were planned, visual directions for non-readers and non-English speaking homemakers were prepared, and containers suitable for storing opened packages of dried eggs were collected. Practical recipes for all the food products were strategically placed for distribution to homemakers. Press releases, radio, and TV announcements were

prepared and ready for use at the proper time. Workers in allied professions—public health nurses, social workers, and the like—who visit needy families as a part of their job—were alerted and ready to cooperate.

By the time the foods reached the distribution points virtually every group that could promote the program was ready to help. Demonstrations were given at distribution centers, in housing projects, churches, recreation halls, and in homes. Unnecessary duplication of services was prevented. Information disseminated was consistent and thus confusion was avoided. The committees made an important contribution to launching the expanded program.

Recruitment

Over the years, many committees have promoted interest in the foods and nutrition professions.

Some set up exhibits in libraries, schools, and store windows calling attention to professional opportunities in the many areas of home economics. Nutritionists, dietitians, and home economists in business—all members of State or local nutrition committees—have participated in "career day" activities in secondary schools. Other committees have publicized their willingness to help (1) young people learn more about a particular phase of the foods and nutrition field as a possible life work and (2) those who are seeking a career somewhat later in life, particularly women whose children are now reared.

UNIQUE CHARACTER OF NUTRITION COMMITTEES

The interdisciplinary composition of nutrition committees sets them apart from other professional organizations and, at the same time, increases their potential for effectiveness. When representatives from many community groups whose work has a nutritional component meet and learn to work together, understanding of all community problems usually increases in depth.

Value in an Emergency

Because numerous community agencies are represented, each with lines of communication to the public it serves, a large segment of the population can be reached quickly when an emergency arises. Nutrition committees, as we know them today, grew out of the food emergencies of World War II. They served their communities well, and many have continued to work on the varied community problems described earlier. Some felt the need no longer existed and disbanded. Later some of these realized they were needed and resumed their work. The Florida committee is now in the process of being re-established.

The successful coordinating function provided by several States in launching the expanded donated food program was possible because the already-established committee had a structure ready for fast action when an emergency arose.

What Happens with No Emergency

Some committees appear to lose interest when an emergency is over. Attendance falls off and the "little problems," often persistent, and always needing attention, do not challenge committee members enough to hold interest. Such groups often tend to take on projects that require more time, materials, or funds than can reasonably be allocated by member agencies. Such projects tend to peter out or become too superficial to be effective.

Other committees have seen these "lulls" as an important opportunity for committee growth. Members have found that turning attention from the community to themselves—the working group—can result in a strengthened structure ready for further community service.

Time To Evaluate and To Plan

These groups have taken time to reexamine and evaluate past activities in terms of quality of planning, procedures, measurement of effectiveness. This, too, is the time when a determination of current needs can be made and plans for meeting them developed.

Time To Deepen Mutual Understanding

Often committees have used these "lulls" to bring one another up to date on agency goals, new information, new procedures, and on status of agency programs.

Not only does this increase mutual understanding, but it usually provides increased ways of working together.

COORDINATION OF COMMITTEES

On the Federal level, the Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education (ICNE) has as its members representatives from the various Federal and quasi-official agencies who have an interest in nutrition. The secretariat of the ICNE is located in Nutrition Programs Service, United States Department of Agriculture, and is charged with the responsibility of coordinating nutrition committees. Contact is maintained with approximately 30 such committees.

Means of Coordination

The ICNE members and the staff of Nutrition Programs Service continually strive to keep lines of communication open and working both ways. Only by so doing is co-

operative action on persistent and immediate nutrition problems in the years ahead possible.

Nutrition Program News. Issued bimonthly for the exchange of information among nutrition committees and other groups engaged in promoting good nutrition for people of all ages.

The staff is always pleased to hear of nutrition programs and activities in enough detail to make the descriptions useful to other groups with similar problems. We are interested in failures as well as successes, particularly when the group feels it has determined the causes of failure.

We also are interested in topic suggestions from our colleagues, especially from those of you working in communities. If any of you have had experience in the areas suggested, we would like to hear about it. Efforts will be made to include suggested topics when suitable material is available.

Consultant services. The ICNE members who have responsibilities in the States give consultant help to nutrition committees and other concerned groups upon request if their schedules permit. Occasionally, a staff member of Nutrition Programs Service finds it possible to participate in Regional or State activities when her particular training and experience would enhance the program.

National conferences. In 1952, "The Food and Nutrition Institute" was held in Washington, D. C. It provided a progress report of the accomplishments in the field of nutrition since the conference President Roosevelt called in 1941 to discuss the role of nutrition in defense.

The 1952 participants expressed a desire for meetings of this kind at 5-year intervals. As a result, "The Nutrition Education Conference, 1957" and "The Nutrition Education Conference, 1962" brought together key people from all disciplines that influence the nutrition and food habits of people to (1) exchange their experiences informally, (2) take stock of the nutritional situation and the broad body of knowledge available, and (3) to suggest direction of efforts for the years immediately ahead.

The last three conferences, 1952, 1957, and 1962, were sponsored by the ICNE and the USDA working through the Nutrition Programs Service. Several issues of Nutrition Committee News, now Nutrition Program News, have been devoted to descriptions, evaluation, and followup activities of the conferences.

Nutrition committees report many activities based on conference materials and continue to indicate their interest in periodic conferences, particularly in the area of applied nutrition.